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A Brief History of Women in Sports

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Women have been progressively gaining more rights and fame in sports since 1865. In the last 150 years, female athletes have both increased in popularity and have done more for feminism outside of sports than ever before.

In the late 19th century, women began their journey into the world of baseball. The first documented women's baseball team, the Dolly Vardens, was formed in 1867 in Philadelphia (Heaphy, 2007, p.23). The Dolly Vardens were a team of entirely Black women, founded "just one year after Philadelphia's first Black men's teams organized" (Heaphy, 2007, p. 23). Due to sparse documentation, not much more is known about the Dolly Vardens, but the first women's baseball championship in the United States was also held in Philadelphia, on July 5, 1879. According to an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the crowd flooded the field such that the police had to cease gameplay in order to keep the players safe; "a number of fights occurred and several arrests were made by police" (qtd in Heaphy, 2007, p. 23). Unfortunately, violent attendees were not the only trouble faced by female baseball teams. Another common difficulty was corruption of the team managers: At least two managers of several teams in the 1880s abandoned their players and stole their team profits (Heaphy, 2007, p. 23). Then in 1885, women began to play baseball against men -- it is unclear if this was for publicity or due to a shortage of female teams -- but these games, too, received little news coverage. Each of these events are

important to history, however, as each step got women a bit closer to widespread athletic acceptance by repeatedly putting female athletes in the spotlight.

By the 1910s, women had begun to create their own social institutions away from men; one example is the Illinois Women's Athletic Club in Chicago. The club was a place for women to relax, enjoy various recreational activities, and make friends. The *Chicago Tribune* wrote in 1921 that the club was granted a nonprofit organization charter in 1918 and became so popular that it needed to expand three years later (Chicago Tribune). The new building was to "contain spacious lobbies, dining and reception rooms, a cafeteria and tea room, libraries, convention halls, studios, gymnasium, swimming pool, beauty parlors, women's shops, a bank [...] and stage facilities" (Chicago Tribune, 1921). Women as far away as New York, California, and Mississippi enrolled for membership. The Illinois Women's Athletic Club is historically significant because it marks a time when women decided they were worth having a recreational facility of their own to play sports for leisure.

Baseball wasn't the only sport women ventured into in the 19th and 20th centuries; aviation was another area where women excelled. Amelia Earhart inspired women of her generation and many generations beyond. In 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, she gave a publicly broadcasted speech on the radio about the roles women had and could have in science. In the speech, Earhart describes how the rise of modern science has benefited women more than "any

other group,” and “probably no scientific development has been more startling than the access of this new and growing economic independence upon women themselves” (Jacobsen & Earhart). She posits that females are able to enter the field of applied science more easily than other fields because men have not yet claimed the field for themselves (Jacobsen & Earhart). Earhart also marvels at how aviation went from “an inventor’s dream” to “an everyday actuality” in a mere three decades (Jacobsen & Earhart). While women “have not taken full advantage of [aviation’s] use and benefits,” women are “finding more and more opportunities for employment” in aviation (Jacobsen & Earhart). Earhart’s speech is significant because few women were widely broadcast for purposes other than entertainment in the first half of the 20th century, and because her speech was accessible to a huge audience, including young children. For the first time, girls had the idea that they truly could be whatever they wanted; it didn’t matter what society told them.

Another significant advance in female sports history is the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), which existed from 1943 to 1954. This was a nation-wide league of entirely female baseball teams founded for the purpose of providing entertainment when many male baseball players were away at war. Betsy Jochum, an AAGPBL player for the South Bend Blue Sox, was interviewed about her experiences by the *South Bend Tribune* in 2018. While the AAGPBL was an excellent opportunity for its players, the league had quite a few

rules demonstrating societal norms of the era. Players had to attend charm school, where they learned the correct way “to walk gracefully down stairs and put on their coats” (Fosmoe, 2018). Players could not go on dates without a chaperone, smoke or drink in public, or wear pants -- they could only wear skirts to preserve their feminine appearances (Fosmoe, 2018). Local newspapers regularly covered the AAGPBL, which was not often the case for previous all-female sporting events. Jochum says that she even made more money than her father, which made up for her difficult schedule: “We played every day, with double headers on Sundays and holidays. No days off. Even when we traveled, we’d get back to town at 5 o’clock in the morning and play that evening.” The AAGPBL would play at least eight games a week, while men’s professional teams like the MLB and others play six to seven, taking significant travel days off. The women’s hard work paid off, however: the Blue Sox especially were well loved -- “the fans never booed us,” Jochum said -- and had a high level of attendance for the era (Fosmoe, 2018). The AAGPBL was important because girls could watch someone just like them play a professional sport reserved for men and boys, and because it showed that female athletes were just as capable as men.

The single most important advance in female sports history is the passage of Title IX in 1972. For the first time, women and girls’ right to play sports was legislated. Girls still had to fight school and district rules, but there was finally a law stating that schools must allow them to play sports-- even on all-male teams,

if there were no female teams. Benefits for female athletes were and are widespread. A study in *The Review of Economics and Statistics* states that since the passage of Title IX, female athletes make more money in their careers than their nonathletic counterparts (Stevenson, 2010, pp. 286, 294). Female athletes are also more likely to receive and accept full time employment opportunities than other women (Stevenson, 2010, p. 294) and are more likely to attend and complete college than other women (Stevenson, 2010, p. 293). The passage of Title IX was truly life-altering for female athletes, and its effects are still being felt today.

In 1991, the United States Women's National [Soccer] Team (USWNT) won the very first FIFA Women's World Cup. The USWNT won again in 2019, and members of the 1991 team were interviewed by *National Geographic* about their experiences in context of the 2019 USWNT victory. 1991 USWNT Most Valuable Player Carin Jennings Gabarra said that playing soccer "wasn't the right thing to do," adding that she often hid the fact that she played soccer professionally (Wolters, 2019). Another player, Shannon Higgins-Cirovski, recalls that when the 1991 USWNT was in France, her team stayed in a farmhouse with a small bus for transportation, while a local boys youth team had been put up at a hotel with a luxury bus (Wolters, 2019). When they could get a hotel, the USWNT also had to sleep in "cockroach-infested hotel rooms" (Wolters, 2019). Discrimination didn't change between 1991 and 2019, either. In

2018, the USWNT prize money was doubled to \$30 million by FIFA, but the United States Men's National Team prize is \$400 million (Wolters, 2019). Still, the USWNT generated nearly \$51 million in revenue between 2016 and 2018, while the men generated just shy of \$50 million (Bachman, 2019, qtd. in Wolters, 2019), showing that female sports have grown in popularity drastically since 1991.

Women in sports have always faced discrimination, adversity, and even physical and verbal violence. Despite this, female athletes have routinely overcome obstacles, including legal obstacles, to play. Progressing since 1865, female sports participation has steadily increased, female athletes have become more popular in the public eye, and women have earned more rights as a whole, due at least in part to each of the events covered here.

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